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ABSTRACT

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TRANSLATION: A CABLE OF MANY STRANDS

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Translation may be compared to a cable composed of many simultaneous strands of transfer. In translation, there is replacement which involves general hierarchical organization, grammatical constructions and constituents, mapping of deep onto surface structures, classes, ordering, lexicon, phonology, concordance, points of ambiguity, and information loss and gain. A fundamental assumption is that the content of a document is independent of the language in which it is expressed. To transmit the content of a document into another language, the translator must be more concerned with the overall effect of his effort than with correspondence of outward form--if he is not to lose the kernel in preoccupation with the husk.

What is the nature of translation? Granted that translation is a phenomenon which we observe and are somewhat familiar with, it must be admitted at the onset that there is no easy answer to this question. Translation is an extremely complex process of transfer. Witness the fact of the continuing failure of machine translation, despite the great amount of money and energy expended on such projects. In this brief presentation, I want to suggest a fundamental assumption underlying all translation; then I want to approach translation as a cable composed of many simultaneous strands of transfer. I want to point out a few of those necessary components of translation without pretending that the apparatus is at all exhaustive.

I believe that we could say that a fundamental assumption of translation is the following: there is a content common to the several versions of the same document translated into any number and type of languages. Therefore, for example, in the type of work which I have been doing for many years, we assume that there is such a document as the New Testament, that it is not bound to any particular language or family of languages, but that the content found in it may be expressed in any language spoken throughout the entire world. This is a startling assumption when one looks at it closely. Nevertheless, without such an assumption, no one would attempt to translate anything into another language. I believe that something could be done towards establishment of this assumption if a technique similar to Harris' discourse analysis

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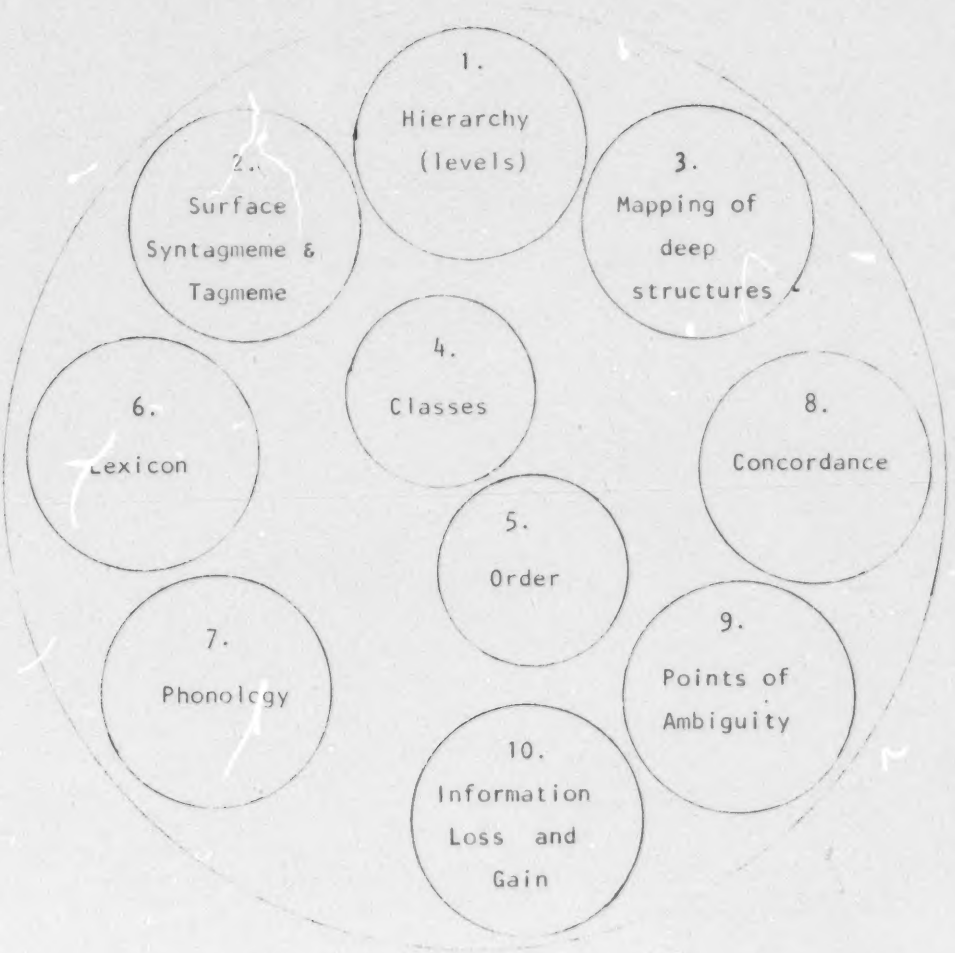

SOME SIMULTANEOUS STRANDS OF TRANSFER IN THE CABLE OF TRANSLATION

--which is a variety of content analysis--could be applied to some document translated into a number of languages of differing types. If such work were done consistently by the same person or by a closely cooperating body of people, it is possible that the resulting arrays of symbols in various languages could be something like an overt demonstration of the underlying unity of a document translated into many languages. However, in view of the man hours which would be needed to work out such a study embracing an adequate sample of the world's languages, the thesis here expressed will remain an assumption for some time. Nevertheless, it seems axiomatic to the very notion of translation.

Notice the diagram which accompanies this paper. This diagram is frankly based on the metaphor that translation may be compared to the transmission of a message along a cable composed of many strands. The human translator when translating a document from one language to another, transmits simultaneously along these simultaneous strands of transfer. Widely divergent considerations are involved in the simultaneous transfers, and since little is known as yet as to the precise inter-relation of these various considerations, it is much too complex a process to program for a computor at present.

1. THE HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATION AND LEVELS FOUND WITHIN ONE LANGUAGE ARE REPLACED BY THE HIERARCHICAL ORGANIZATION AND LEVELS FOUND WITHIN ANOTHER LANGUAGE. This is one strand of transfer. It involves consideration of the fundamental organization of the language in terms of its grammatical hierarchy (Longacre, 1970). We cannot assume that all languages necessarily have the same hierarchical arrangement. Thus, while it is very common to find the following system of hierarchy--morpheme, stem, word, phrase, clause, sentence, paragraph, and discourse--it by no means follows that this is the only possible arrangement. For example, in the Mayan languages spoken in southern Mexico and Guatemala and Honduras, it becomes unprofitable to distinguish words from phrases for reasons which have been argued in print (Delgaty, 1960; Church, 1960; Jacobs and Longacre, 1967), and which I do not want to repeat here. Also in three Aboriginal languages of Australia which were studied in the recent New Guinea project (in which I am still engaged) it was found that when we looked for the four levels--clause, sentence, paragraph, and discourse--it did not seem possible or necessary in any of these languages to distinguish all four.[1] In fact, we combined either clause and sentence as the same level or we combined sentence and paragraph. No more than three levels are needed in the upper reaches of the grammatical organization of these languages. Having stated these exceptions, however, it remains that there is not as much variation in fundamental hierarchical organization and number of levels encountered from language to language as in other phases of the language structure. I hurry then to No. 2.

2. THE GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND CONSTITUENTS OF ONE LANGUAGE ARE REPLACED BY THE GRAMMATICAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND CONSTITUENTS OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE. To put this in the phraseology of tagmemics, I would say that the syntagmemes and tagmemes of one language (Longacre, 1965) are replaced by the syntagmemes and tagmemes of another language. I am speaking here of surface structures and of contrasting taxonomy of constructions within the surface. It is, of course, a notable fact that surface structures of language differ considerably--this point need not be labored. It needs to be emphasized, however, that surface structures are important, as they inevitably involve a meaning of sorts which is imposed on the deep structures that they encode. Furthermore, everything which is to be expressed in a given language must be expressed through these surface structures with their accompanying surface structure constraints. The translator is utterly shut up to the inventory of surface constructions which a given target language offers him. When surface structures of two languages differ considerably, the translator must sometimes choose greatly varying surface structures in the target language from those found in the source language. If he is over-anxious to preserve similarity of grammatical form, he may very well loose or badly confuse the essential message of the document that he is translating.

3. THE MAPPING OF DEEP STRUCTURES ONTO SURFACE STRUCTURES IN THE SOURCE LANGUAGE IS REPLACED BY THE MAPPING OF DEEP STRUCTURES ONTO SURFACE STRUCTURES IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE. We assume here some rather common assumptions on the current grammatical scene. We assume that deep grammar categories are much more universal than surface structures, and that languages are more similar in their deep grammars than in their surface grammars. However, the mapping of depth to surface can vary considerably from language to language, and in translation this is an important strand of transfer. Thus, in some languages expressions which have the surface structure of causality are used to express paraphrase. Thus, we may have a sentence like 'He wasn't there because he was absent that day', where 'He wasn't there' and 'he was absent' are paraphrases and the only new information found in the causal construction is 'that day'. Another language may be more conservative about its uses of surface structure causal constructions, and not encourage such bald tautologies. Again, a language may have a construction which expresses simultaneous events: 'As he walked, he was looking back over his shoulder.' This simultaneous surface structure pattern with characteristic conjunction and characteristic constraints as to what may go on each side of the conjunction may in some languages be stretched to include one event happening within the time span of the other, such as 'As he walked along, he glanced back over his shoulder', wherein 'walked along' is a continuum and 'glanced back' is an event which takes place within the continuum. A language may furthermore stretch this simultaneous surface construction to include two events

which take place at about the same time, but actually are in chronological succession. So we get a sentence which could be translated into English: 'About the time that she went down, I came home.' We may find, however, that another language does not permit such stretching of its simultaneous surface pattern, but that events of the latter sort must be put into a sentence which expresses chronological succession, or simple coordination which is indifferent as to time. Only in a few places in the structure of a language do we find a one-to-one mapping of deep structure and surface structure. Commonly we have a many-to-one or a one-to-many mapping of the deep structures onto the surface (Ballard, Conrad, Longacre, 1971). Since this pattern of mapping differs from language to language, this is an important concern of the translator--although he often handles it on an utterly subconscious level.

The preceding three strands of transfer are somewhat related to each other. Resultant on these three are the next two.

4. ONE SET OF CLASSES OF MORPHEMES AND MORPHEME SEQUENCES MUST BE EXCHANGED FOR ANOTHER SET OF SUCH CLASSES. We assume here that various languages by natural, built-in criteria distinguish classes of words from each other, and that this is not merely something imposed by the analyst. For that reason, Pike has called such classes emic classes (1967, pp. 196-218). Classes of this sort have constituency, i.e. they involve certain items and do not involve others, and class meaning. Thus, classes which we call noun, verb, and adjective, occur in the Trique language of Mexico and English, with some such overall class meanings as 'thingness', 'process/event', and 'qualifier', in both languages. Nevertheless, there are some striking differences in the constituency and class meaning of Trique versus English. For example, Trique has almost no abstract nouns. Nouns in Trique are almost entirely actual objects which one can observe or hold. English, by contrast, has many abstract nouns, some of which correspond to verbs, some of which are derived from other parts of speech. It also has many roots used as both verb and noun with rather easy passage from the verb to the noun class, while Trique, on the contrary, has a very clear cleavage between noun and verb. Furthermore, the Trique adjective can qualify noun or verb, while English adjectives must be distinguished from adverb in that adjectives qualify nouns and pronouns, while adverbs qualify verbs or another adjective. This would make for a profound difference in translating from English to Trique, or, for that matter, in translating from Greek to Trique, as in the case of the translation of the Trique New Testament. It means that to a startling degree the Trique New Testament is expressed by means of verbs and clauses involving verbs. Such clauses involving verbs replace entirely the abstract nouns of Greek and English. Where Greek and English say 'God is love', Trique must say 'God is one who loves people'. As a result, the comparatively abstract diction of the

Greek New Testament is replaced by the more concrete diction of the Trique New Testament.

5. THE RELATIVE ORDERING OF CONTENT CHUNKS DIFFERS RADICALLY BETWEEN THE SOURCE LANGUAGE AND THE TARGET LANGUAGE. Again, of course, we note that questions of order are questions of surface structure. Nevertheless, they are very important surface structure constraints without which one cannot express a message within a given language. One of the greatest failings of early missionary translations of the New Testament was a wooden following of the order of the source language in languages where word order was free enough that one could in fact follow the ordering of the source language document. There must be a ruthless shifting about of the order of the content chunk to conform to the grammar and style of the target language. This not only means shifting of phrases within the clause, and shifting of clauses within the sentence, but may also lead to the shifting of sentences within paragraphs, if not of paragraphs within a discourse. It is especially crucial that discourse structure be carefully studied in the various languages of the world so that high level considerations or ordering of content chunks can be properly attended to (Longacre, 1968, Vol I, pp. 1-50). It means, for example, that the ordering of verses within a translation of the New Testament can be very irksome and bothersome for the translator when he hits into the verse barrier. Readers, especially naive readers, do not like to have numbered verses shifted about, yet sometimes the structural requirement and the stylistic requirement of the target language require such a shifting.

6. A further important strand of transfer is, properly speaking, a bundle of strands, namely, THE LEXICON OF ONE LANGUAGE IS REPLACED BY THE LEXICON OF THE OTHER LANGUAGE. This is about the sum total of what the man in the street knows about the translation process. He assumes, for example, that translation from English to German is saying in German words what is said in English words. Oblivious to the many further adjustments which must be made, such a naive translator may even resort to a dictionary in an effort to mechanically substitute German words for English words within a given sentence. The bad quality of such translation can easily be seen in certain early attempts at machine translation. Nevertheless, the fact remains that lexical structures of language differ greatly, and that the entire lexicon of one language is replaced by the lexicon of another language within the translation process. In each case within a given language, the lexical items have meaning as a result of interplay of an item with its context. Therefore it is the whole contextual interplay of item and context in one language which must be replaced by the contextual interplay within another language. In this respect it must be remembered that equivalence in the source language and the target language are only approximate and must be correlated after evaluation of the cultural implications.[2] It should also be remembered that we do not mean that there is a one-to-one substitution of single

lexical items in going from language to language. Sometimes a group of words is translatable by one word; or vice versa, one word is translatable by a group of words. The process is further complicated by the fact that groups of words within the source language or target language may in effect be single lexical items. Special problems also result from the fact that there will be no terms in the target language for items in the source language which are not found in the culture associated with the target language. Thus, if you are translating a document which deals with the ocean and deep-sea fishing for a land-locked tribe, there will be no words for boats, fishing hooks, fishing nets, reels, or anything of that sort. Descriptive phrases may be improved, or words borrowed with all the risks that borrowing entails (of introducing words of zero meaning). A further specialized problem is that there may be much greater elaboration of terms for one facet of culture in one language than in another language. All these considerations are much too involved to be given anything like an adequate presentation in a summary of this sort.

7. THE PHONOLOGY OF ONE LANGUAGE MUST BE REPLACED BY THE PHONOLOGY OF ANOTHER LANGUAGE. Even if two languages were exactly identical in their grammar and lexical structure, the fact that their phonologies differed would still be of considerable importance. For example, there are associations between lexical items which are occasioned by partial or complete homophonity, assonance, rhyme, alliteration, and the like (Longacre, 1964). These associations, which can on occasions be quite powerful, are with rare exceptions lost completely on translation into a second language. Yet these patterns of alliteration, rhyme, assonance, and the like sometimes serve to reinforce the content of the passage, especially if the author of the passage is sensitive to the sound of what he writes.

Three further simultaneous strands of translation need to be pointed out. These last three considerations are to some degree resultant on all that we have discussed previously.

8. THE CONCORDANCE OF LEXICAL ITEMS IN THE SOURCE DOCUMENT IS REPLACED BY A NEW CONCORDANCE OF LEXICAL ITEMS WITHIN THE TARGET LANGUAGE (Longacre, 1968). I define here the concordance as the concurrence of the same lexical items in the varying contexts of a document or series of documents. Concordance establishes connections, whether profound or superficial, between the various contexts of the document. It is therefore a valuable clue to the structure of a text. There is interplay between the concordance of a document and its equivalence chains (equivalence chain is here a concept borrowed from Harris' discourse analysis--I define it as the occurrence of differing lexical items in identical or similar contexts). Therefore, the concordance of the word 'good' would

involve all the passages in a document where the word 'good' occurs, and equivalence chain within the same document might find 'good', 'pleasing', 'bad', and other adjectives within similar contexts. Without going into all the details that go on in translation from one language to another, we note that concordances in the source document are sometimes reduced to equivalence chains within the target language, and vice versa; sometimes equivalence chains within the source language are promoted to concordances involving the same term within the target language. Thus, I think we can say safely that no translation of the Greek New Testament into another language whatever would be able to duplicate the concordance of the Greek word logos within the target language. Logos is a word of such notoriously broad meaning that probably no language in the entire world has a lexical item of sufficiently broad meaning to match it in every single context. To attempt to preserve the concordance between the source language and the target language would be utterly to caricature the content of the source document.

9. POINTS OF AMBIGUITY IN THE SOURCE LANGUAGE WILL NOT CORRESPOND WITH POINTS OF AMBIGUITY IN THE TARGET LANGUAGE IN TRANSLATING A DOCUMENT FROM ONE LANGUAGE TO ANOTHER.[3] Usually this means that points of ambiguity in the source language must be interpreted by the translator, thus robbing the reader of the privilege of choosing two interpretations of the same passage. It is true that occasionally in two languages of similar structure, ambiguities of the source language may be brought over into the target language. On the other hand sometimes these ambiguities cannot be brought over in precisely the sense in which they are found in the first language. What is very probable is that one interpretation, often one quite at variance with the meaning of the source document, emerges as considerably more plausible than the other, so that in place of rendering a genuine ambiguity in the document in the target language we have really loaded the probability on the side of the undesirable interpretation in the source language. Often times too, what is ambiguous but has two plausible interpretations in the source language is simply obscure without any good meaning in the target language. The translator really cannot dodge the onus of being an interpreter in such situations. He must come down good and hard and clearly on the side of one meaning rather than the other.

10. THERE IS THEREFORE SOME INEVITABLE LOSS AND GAIN OF INFORMATION IN GOING FROM A SOURCE LANGUAGE DOCUMENT TO A TARGET LANGUAGE DOCUMENT. This ties into the previous point regarding resolution of ambiguities. It ties also into the fact of concordance loss or gain. It ties into the fact of replacing the lexicon of one language with the lexicon of another language, especially when the source language has fewer terms or more terms in one area of vocabulary than the target language has. This area has been so carefully worked out by Wonderly years ago that I do not see much point to my enlarging on it here (Wonderly, 1952, 1953).

To summarize: translation involves the fundamental assumption that the content of a document is independent of the language in which it is expressed. Therefore a document may be expressed in any language. It is a highly complex process involving many simultaneous transfers. A successful translation is one which follows as closely as possible the grain of the target language enlarging and exploiting its potentiality, and further elaborating and refining it as a calculus of expression. In this process, the structure of one language replaces the structure of another language in respect to the hierarchical organization of the language in general, its construction and construction points, the mapping of deep structures onto surface structures, the grammatical classes, the linear order of content chunks, the lexicon, the phonology, the concordance, the points of ambiguity, and loss and gain of information.

In such a translation, the translator is more concerned with the overall result of his effort, than for correspondence in outward form. Relative order of content chunks is shifted about freely with scruple according to the necessities of the structure and style of the target language. Concordant translation of first language items is given up as an impossibility; on the other hand, irresponsible variation in translation of given items is also avoided. There is sensitivity on the part of the translator to molding of lexical items to context in both the source language and the target language. The closest available equivalents in the source language to target language items are chosen, in that there is no possibility of identity. Ambiguities are resolved whenever possible in the light of information gained elsewhere in the document being translated. At the same time, the translator avoids introducing ambiguities into his translation. There is sensitivity on the part of the translator to information loss and gain so that neither be more excessive than necessary to idiomatic translation. The translator, furthermore, is sensitive to the sound of the version as well as to its sense.

Footnotes

[1] United States Government Contract OEC-0-9-097756-4409(014) 'Hierarchy and Universality of Discourse Constituents (New Guinea Languages).' The Australian Aboriginal languages here referred to are: Walmatjari (data from Joyce Hudsor), Mantjiltjara (James Marsh), and Wik-Munkan (Barbara Sayers).

[2] This has been an early, insistent emphasis of Eugene Nida in his Bible Translating (American Bible Society, 1947) and in subsequent books and articles.

[3] This point has been rather exhausitvely covered by my colleague John Beekman in unpublished lectures given at Ixmiquilpan, Mexico, and other places.

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